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Territorial Social Innovation in the Nordic Countries and Scotland

West Harris Trust

Founded by the community in 2008, the West Harris Trust is a community charity responsible for managing 7225ha of land that it purchased from the Scottish Government in January 2010. Its overall aim is to reverse population decline in the area by creating housing and employment opportunities and attracting new residents (predominantly young families). Work undertaken so far has include the installation of three wind turbines, construction of a pontoon and associated marine shed and development, design and construction of a Community Enterprise Centre and six affordable houses.



Preconditions, Inspiration, Nurture

The population of West Harris was shrinking fast with a decline of 50 percent between 1951 and 2001 (West Harris Crofting Trust 2009).¹ Of particular concern was the portion of the population that were economically active (58% compared with a regional average of 84% and a national average of 80%); the small number of young families in the community (15 school children, and one pre-school child); and the portion of the population who were over 65 years old (35%). Lack of employment opportunities appeared to be a key barrier to retaining and attracting young people/families to West Harris. Lack of appropriate housing – in particular rental housing – was also a problem.

In 2007, community members formed a steering group to assess the options for addressing these challenges. The group received a £10,000 grant from the Big Lottery Fund's Investing in Ideas programme and engaged consultants to conduct an investigation into potential actions. The final recommendation was that the community purchase the estates that make up the western side of Harris (3 in total) from the Scottish Government.

A postal ballot was held in October 2008, and the proposal to buy the land received support from 77 percent of the community. West Harris Trust was then formed with 81 percent of the West Harris population becoming members (membership was open to all). A plan to acquire the three estates was developed and, in January 2010, the West Harris Trust purchased 7225ha of land from the Scottish Government.

¹ This figure is for Harris as a whole however the document referenced finds no reason to believe that demographic trends have been dramatically different across the island.

Implementation

Resources

Following the purchase of the land, West Harris Trust put together an ambitious development plan designed to pave the way to economic sustainability. The cornerstone of the plan was construction of a hydro-electric scheme, the proceeds of which would be used to fund other priority activities. Funds were secured from several sources, including £380,000 from the Big Lottery Fund. Before construction could begin however, a ruling was passed stating that renewable energy schemes developed using public money would not be eligible for government subsidised feed in tariffs. This was problematic for West Harris Trust, as the ongoing income from the scheme was vital to the organisation's plans for long-term financial stability. As a result, a decision was made to work with private financiers on the scheme and it is only just coming to fruition now.

In the meantime, West Harris Trust has been working to achieve a range of other goals. Fortunately, the Big Lottery Fund remained committed to the spirit behind the funding they had pledged for the hydro-electric scheme, agreeing to reallocate the funds on request provided proposed projects still met the original aim of supporting the future of the West Harris community. A portion of these funds were used to employ a commercial development manager for a 3-4 year period and the rest was used to attract match funding for several key capital projects.

West Harris Trust has a voluntary Board of Directors and currently employs four paid staff including a Commercial development manager, Business Development Officer, an Administrator and an operations manager for the soon to be opened Community Enterprise Centre.

The Network / Cooperation

Being the land-owner has been central to promoting community cooperation. As the current Commercial Development Manager explains:

Owning the land makes a massive difference in the way that local people view their relationship to it – the simple fact that they own the land motivates people to think about what they should do with it.

This in turn promotes cooperation, as decisions about how use of the land can best serve the needs of the community are made by the community through their membership in the trust. West Harris Trust is fortunate to have several very talented directors that are prepared to put in a lot of their own time. They also have specific skills that are relevant to the work of the Trust. These people were also quite instrumental in getting the original purchase of the ground.

West Harris Trust enjoys strong cooperation with both the John Muir Trust (partnership agreement that facilitates collaboration around shared goals) and North Harris Trust (use of work-space and information sharing). North Harris Trust was established in 2003 in order to purchase the North Harris Estate. Learning from the neighbours was useful in a formal sense but information was also shared in an informal way. Residents of West Harris who had concerns about the buy-out could go straight to people on the other estate and find out about how things had turned out in practice.

Enablers and Barriers

The decision of the Big Lottery Fund to reallocate the funding originally earmarked for the hydro-electric scheme to other West Harris Trust projects was a vital enabler. It provided a tremendous amount of flexibility, saving time and energy that would otherwise have been spent on lengthy funding applications and making it easier to attract match funding. This had a huge impact on the efficacy with which the organisation was able to do things. It also provided freedom to pursue goals specific to the needs of the community as opposed to adjusting aspirations to meet the requirements of whatever funding happened to be available at the time. Without the flexibility offered by these funds both the ambition and the outcomes of West Harris Trust would have been substantially less.

The following examples illustrate the way that the freedom to use the Big Lottery Fund funding in a flexible way added value to West Harris Trust projects:

- **Example 1: Pontoon and a shed as a marine shore base.** Some funding became available through LEADER due to underspent funds in a previous funding round. Projects needed to be delivered very quickly and, as a result, funding was only available to organisations that could provide match funding that would be available immediately. By using the Big Lottery Fund money West Harris Trust could achieve this and as a result the project was able to go ahead. Two businesses now operate out of the shed – one marine related and the other renovating old VW camper vans and renting them out to holiday makers. Thus, the project has provided valuable business opportunities for two local people as well as some rental income for the Trust.
- **Example 2: Inclusion of affordable housing in Community Enterprise Centre plans.** In the early stages West Harris Trust had three key priorities that it sought to address: 1) Lack of affordable housing; 2) Lack of business opportunities; and 3) Lack of tourism infrastructure. A site was identified where all three priorities could be addressed but a key challenge was that most funding bodies will not fund

housing. The Big Lottery Fund was no exception. They were prepared to be flexible however, and agreed that, given housing made up only one element of the project, they could still put funds towards the development and design. This, along with additional funding provided by Highlands and Island Enterprise, allowed for the development of 6 new affordable houses on the site. This is likely to result in 15-20 new residents and will also provide income for West Harris Trust that can be put towards other projects for the community.

Interaction with Municipalities and Other Levels of Governance

Along with the Big Lottery Fund, support from the municipality and from Highlands and Island Enterprise (HIE), the economic development agency for the region, has also been vital. The municipality's attitude to community land ownership is very positive and it has invested a considerable amount of money in community development. This includes providing financial support for the buyouts themselves (which can also be seen as a form of political support), for developing community owned land, and also assisting with practical tasks – for example conducting ballots prior to buy-outs occurring. West Harris Trust's Commercial Development Manager characterised council's approach as being underpinned by the thinking: How can we make it easier for communities to achieve their goals? This approach was largely attributed to: 1) Council understanding that it does not have the resources to deliver what remote communities need by itself; 2) Many Councillors actually coming from these communities. As a result they are both incredibly supportive of rural development and have a strong understanding of the issues rural communities face.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise was described as taking a similar approach. Although its primary role is as an economic development agency, the organisation also has a social mandate and a community development team in place to support communities to achieve their goals.

In neighbouring municipalities support from council is considerably weaker and the economic development agency does not have a social mandate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, rates of community land ownership are considerably lower in these areas.

Social Innovation Effects

Outcomes, Impact and 'Scaling'

Since the community took over the land, the population of West Harris has grown from 119 to 144. The number of children under five years old has also grown – from one to seven. Although this comes too late to save the school at West Harris, it will go a long way to keeping alive the remaining schools on the island.

The trust itself is very close to securing financial independence thanks to income generated through a diverse range of streams including: commercial and residential rental income, renewable energy generation and tourism activities (e.g. rental of powered sites). The aim is to sustain core operations through the income on the trust's commercial ventures and continue to seek grants for new projects of benefit to the community.

West Harris Trust has undertaken many successful ventures big and small including the installation of three wind turbines and construction of a pontoon and associated marine shed (discussed above). By far the most ambitious project to date has been the development, design and construction of a Community Enterprise Centre and six affordable houses (on the same site). The centre includes a restaurant that will be run by a local business owner and four business units most of which will be tenanted by new residents or residents returning to the area after having moved away. The centre is situated in a stunning location and will have a strong focus on tourism. The business that have been accepted as tenants are all focused on arts and crafts and the centre operations manager is focused heavily on promoting West Harris as a place to come to get married. By taking on other elements of the wedding planning it is hoped that this position can be made permanent full-time and also be instrumental in providing a new market for local businesses. At the time of writing, the opening of the Community Enterprise Centre was imminent.

Lessons Learned

As a starting point, it is important to acknowledge that Harris Trust's position as the land owner has been a fundamental component of its success. It has facilitated community cooperation and encouraged an integrated approach to development. The trust is in a strong position to shape the development of the community as it can make land available for business, housing and community purposes. While the Scottish case is quite particular with respect to community land ownership, the principles of community ownership (in the less tangible sense of the word) and the value of a holistic approach are none-the-less useful take-away messages.

Secondly, the West Harris Trust case highlight the importance of linking social and economic goals, perhaps even posing a challenge to commonly held assumptions about economic development in remote areas. All of the spaces that have been made available by West Harris Trust for commercial activity have been occupied from the outset (or will be in the case of the Community Enterprise Centre). In fact, the applications to rent the spaces actually outnumbered the spaces available. The Commercial Development Manager described a similar experience in North Harris. So while funders might say "it's a remote area who wants to start a business there" it appears that, in this case at least, there is a strong demand for commercial space.

The third lesson that can be learned from the West Harris Trust case relates to the importance of political and financial support in allowing a young community organisation to achieve positive outcomes. The flexibility provided by Big Lottery Fund following the change of plans with respect to the hydro-electric scheme is of particular note. Having these funds available had a huge impact on West Harris Trust's ability to both set and pursue ambitious goals for the community. It would be interesting to explore how this type of flexible funding availability would work on a larger scale. The positive and helpful approach of Highlands Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise was also a key component of the success.

Finally, the Commercial Development Manager offered the following advice for communities thinking about embarking on a similar endeavour:

What I would say to any community is that it's going to take you longer than you think to deliver what you want to do. So you need to be patient and to be very tenacious. Despite having a good, positive, helpful environment here there is still a huge amount of work people need to put in and there are a lot of challenges and quite often seemingly impossible barriers to be overcome. But it's surprising how you can get over them.

References

West Harris Crofting Trust 2009, Purchase of West Harris Estates, Retrieved June 2015,
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